

On the road to ecocentrism

Every spring, often just as the ice is floating out of the harbours, my wife and I arrive to Isle Royale – an island wilderness in Lake Superior. One springtime interest is to find moose and document patterns of hair-loss left by a peculiar kind of tick that afflicts these moose. The effort invariably includes passing time at mud licks – sites where the groundwater, rich in sodium, seeps to the surface. Moose are attracted to these sites.

Since I was a little boy I'd wanted to become a wildlife biologist, the meaning of which was re-affirmed every Sunday evening of my youth fawning over Technicolor re-runs of *Wild Kingdom* with Marlin Perkins: "Jim and I are here in a remote jungle and we're going to wrestle this anaconda." I now know those antics had as much to do with understanding nature as the World Wrestling Federation has to do with sport. But then I wasn't really interested in understanding nature. I was just bored with what seemed the rote script of suburban life. I just craved adventure. In early adulthood, I attended university. Fortuitously, studying the wolves and moose of Isle Royale became a fixture of my entire adult life. I also grew to become part of a community of conservation ecologists – all in for protecting populations and ecosystems.

We roll out of the tent by 5.00 AM, raise eyebrows at the ice that formed overnight on the pot of cooking water, and stumble over the hill to the edge of the mud lick. Except for the time it takes to eat a bowl of oatmeal in the morning and a dehydrated dinner in the evening, we keep watch from the edge of the mud lick until about 10.00 PM. To maximize the effort, Leah and I typically find different vantage points from which to view the mud lick. After two

or three days we have usually seen most of the different moose that frequent any particular mud lick. Time at a mud lick is mostly quiet waiting and listening for the grunt of an old bull, for the shuffling of hooves through the leaves, or for the splash of a young cow crossing the creek up around the bend.

We share the mornings with a shivering boredom that requires some management. Readjust to chase off pins and needles that tingle a calf muscle. Think of reasons to find a new position along the edge of the mud lick. Watch pirouetting water striders. If I move over there the sun will warm my face and chest. Yes, that's a good reason. Make the move. A hoot and a yodel, and a loon rockets across the sky. More pins and needles. Nibble trail mix, one peanut or raisin at a time, at a controlled rate to meter the time. A red squirrel vaults across the branches overhead. If I move over there I'll get better pictures because the sun will be at my back.

At some unscripted moment boredom is shattered – a moose. Must be very quiet. Wolves know these mud licks and their gravitational pull on moose. And moose know that wolves know. Moose approach with vigilance. It's okay to let a moose see you as it approaches. They recognize the difference between me and a wolf. But a moose should see you before they hear you. They are not quick to discern the source of a crackled leaf or snapped twig. Absolute quiet until the moose sees you. Then some talking in a deep gentle voice is useful. Most moose here understand that humans are harmless and that they speak English, whereas they've never heard a wolf speak one word of English.

With four firmly planted hooves, a moose can reach its mouth across a 4-foot arc. Not

John A Vucetich

About the author

John is Professor of Conservation at Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI, USA.

Citation

Vucetich JA (2017) On the road to ecocentrism. *The Ecological Citizen* 1(Suppl A): 25–7.

Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

“Some moose reach the mud by spreading their front legs like a stilt-legged clown trying to touch the ground. Others reach the ground by resting on their ankles after turning their toes and feet backward.”

impressed? Try it yourself. A large sweep is useful during the winter, when another step means pushing aside knee-deep snow and each bite offers just a gram of nutrition. A moose's mouth does not, however, reach the mud quite so naturally. Some moose reach the mud by spreading their front legs like a stilt-legged clown trying to touch the ground. Others reach the ground by resting on their ankles after turning their toes and feet backward. Five or ten minutes of more-or-less non-stop slurping is typical. We sit behind the camera's shutter waiting for each moose to offer a complete profile of its left side and then its right side. Some moose slurp on and off for an hour or more. Sometimes three or four moose are in attendance at once. But much of the time is just waiting for moose.

By early afternoon, the morning chill had dissolved into light delirium induced by a swirling tincture of swamp quietude and solar brilliance. I was tired of sitting. I repositioned and took a turn at standing, less standing and more draped over the tripod and camera. Then a peculiar sensation, a little push from beneath the sole of my Croc™ footwear, worn thin

from the wilderness. I straightened up, feigning to myself about having been alert. Was I already that bored with standing? Whatever. I shifted my weight and returned to a hazier state of mind.

Last summer's swamp sedges, dead and desiccated, still stood tall and rustled in a light breeze. Green shoots were still only an accent to the beige hues of early spring. I stood right at the edge, where the soil was soft with moisture, but not saturated. Nothing particularly advantageous about this position, except being just dry enough to keep water from percolating through the tiny hole in the sole of my foam footwear. Again that same funny sensation on the bottom of my foot. I shifted weight again. With a third push, I compared the observation against hypotheses pertaining to the state of my faculties.

I was hungry – not really hunger, just bored-hungry. The six-year-old in me was tired of standing. The grown-up in me wasn't going to reposition, not so soon after the last repositioning. Then another push. Exasperated, I abandoned my post in a huff, took a step aside, got down on my knees, and pushed the grass aside to meet the



A moose.

pointed nose of a baseball-sized toad. She had been pushing her head against my Croc with all the force she could muster by doing toad push-ups. She was trying to stretch out after a long winter's nap. Her black eyes were not half-mast, but wide open. Eye contact was unavoidable. I really do not know the cognitive capabilities of a toad, and I might have projected the thought, but she seemed to be wondering whether I was insensitive – or just plain dumb.

A year before at the same mud lick, in the same delirious state of mind, a thought occurred to me. I hadn't been looking for thoughts. Nevertheless, one scrolled across the teleprompter of my mind. I was sitting in the wilderness counting what was left of the day's allotment of M&M's®. And then: *How many other moose does a moose know?* Then the words: *Is it boring to chew cud for eight hours of every day?* I wondered: *What is it like to be a moose?* Overwhelmed with warm sentiment? No, the questions struck me, cold and horrifying. If you were to select a hundred people, all at random, from all parts of the world and all walks of life. Make that a hundred million people. Line them up in order, most to least knowledgeable about moose – especially moose populations and moose as a species – I would be pretty close to the front of that line. *But I had no idea how to answer those questions.*

Soon afterwards, I realized that moose are not merely alive, but that each moose *has a life*. A moose has memories of yesterday, hopes for tomorrow, joys and fears, and a story to be told. If a moose has a life – so I reasoned (with the awesome powers of deduction I had acquired from all those years in school) – then I'd bet that a wolf has a life too. If moose and wolves have 'lives', then the toad and chickadee and squirrel that live in town (just outside our house) in all likelihood have lives too. Being less familiar with the details of their lives in no way diminishes the fact: *they each have their own life.*

As I understand it, ecocentrism is to acknowledge and honour the intrinsic value of ecosystems, populations and individual organisms – the entire

hierarchy of life without prejudice for or against any rung in the hierarchy. And, the basis for this intrinsic value? Curiously, the basis for intrinsic value may be different for the different rungs. For organisms, intrinsic value rises from their interests to flourish. Conjoin that circumstance with what some know as the Golden Rule and a bit of logical consistency – the result is an obligation to treat organisms fairly and with concern for their interests and welfare. What reasoning gives rise to the intrinsic value of populations and ecosystems? Aldo Leopold said that we organisms, populations and ecosystems are members of the same community of life – community membership is what imbues us all with intrinsic value. Arne Naess said it comes from a metaphysical belief that we organisms are so interconnected with populations and ecosystems that we all inherit intrinsic value from, essentially, being one-in-the-same.

Having been thoroughly trained and enwrapped in the phenomena of populations and ecosystems, I came rather late in life to realize how organisms possess intrinsic value. With this realization, I am haunted by a different understanding of ecocentrism, by which concern for ecosystems and populations generally trumps concern of individual organisms. I fear that understanding leads to killing wolves to save an endangered population of caribou in southern Alberta, when humans not wolves are culpable for the harm to those caribou. And trophy hunting lions because we're not wise enough to envision another way to conserve wild populations of lions. When I was younger, I would not have questioned such a view. Then on an outrageously beautiful spring day, I met a moose at a mud lick. Now, I doubt the wisdom of such judgements.

I have no doubt about the shortcomings of anthropocentrism. But I'm still on my Damascene road to ecocentrism. Where that road will take me I cannot say. But I think it's fair to say that I didn't start down that road until sometime after I first wondered whether the thoughts of a moose are beyond my imagination. ■

Suggested further reading

- Vucetich JA (2010) Wolves, ravens, and a new purpose for science. In: Moore K and Nelson MP, eds. *Moral Ground: Ethical action for a planet in peril*. Trinity University Press, San Antonio, TX, USA: 337–42.
- Vucetich JA (2016) Introducing the wolf: "Should humans intervene when climate change threatens an island's ecology?". *Natural History* **124**: 20–3.
- Vucetich JA, Bruskotter JT and Nelson MP (2015) Evaluating whether nature's intrinsic value is an axiom of or anathema to conservation. *Conservation Biology* **29**: 321–32.
- Vucetich JA and Nelson MP (2007) What are 60 warblers worth? Killing in the name of conservation. *Oikos* **116**: 1267–78.
- Vucetich JA and Nelson MP (2010) Sustainability: Virtuous or vulgar? *BioScience* **60**: 539–44.